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A Pioneer Intercept Operator March 1

Edward Otte was a member of the “On-the-Roof Gang,” the first professional intercept operators in the Navy. They were trained atop the Navy Building --- located about where the Vietnam Memorial now is on the mall in the District of Columbia --- in the 1930s.

Otte lived in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and wanted to join the Navy. He had served in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a depression-era government program that provided temporary employment to young men, but CCC jobs were only for a year.

Otte was rejected for Navy enlistment due to flat feet, but a recruiter gave him some exercises good for his soles, and he went into the Navy in December 1933. He served in general duties for about a year, then applied for radio school. Despite having no apparent qualifications, except wanting to leave the deck force, he was accepted. The Radio Officer said they wanted people with good records who could be taught right from the beginning.

He took to radio work and proved to be very good at it, so good, in fact, that a petty officer named Norman Lewis, who had just returned from special training in Washington, DC, asked him to join a special crew. Lewis couldn't tell him what the work was, but assured Otte that if he liked working as a radioman, he would enjoy the new duties. Lewis also assured Otte he could return to his regular duties if it happened he didn't like the new work. Otte agreed to try it.

This was on the USS *Omaha*. Otte went to work in a small compartment, about eight by eight, with a radio receiver, a chair, and a small shelf to write reports on. The operators would turn an antenna and check the compass, then report it. The *Omaha* operators were performing direction finding (DF) on German and Italian ships.

Years later, Otte remembered an altercation over access to these spaces. The Officer of the Deck, an ensign, sought entry into the DF room. Otte refused to

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admit him, citing orders to let no unauthorized personnel inside. The ensign put Otte on report, but the next day the Omaha's captain sided with Otte and issued a memo on access to the cleared spaces.

When the *Omaha* returned to the States, Otte was sent to formal training at the Naval Headquarters Building in intercepting Japanese naval communications. He was in class number 23 in 1938, which he later described as a "cram course." Those who took this special training were later known collectively as the "On The Roof Gang."

After graduating from the training in June, Otte was stationed in the Philippines at a collection site at Cavite. As the tension with Japan grew more intense, the Navy dug a tunnel for intercept operations at the Army island refuge Corregidor. Otte soon was transferred there.

The tunnel on Corregidor grew increasingly crowded as personnel came from sites in China, which the Japanese had already invaded. For Otte and many of the other intercept operators, however, Corregidor had some advantages. The island had some family housing for married officers, but the families had been sent out of the Philippines, so the operators were bunked in them.

The intercept site on Corregidor had a commercial radio in it as well as the intercept sets. It was from this radio that the operators on "the rock" learned that Honolulu was being bombed on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941.

Otte later related that he was not too worried immediately after the Japanese attack. All his colleagues believed that President Roosevelt would send airplanes and ships to protect the Philippines. He started to worry when Japanese aircraft began strafing Corregidor. He and his friends did not speculate about evacuation, or what would happen if they weren't pulled out. He was informed by a chief petty officer that he would be evacuated, but the scheduled move was canceled.

On March 16, Otte and fourteen of his colleagues finally were evacuated on the USS *Permit*, one of the oldest submarines in the U.S. fleet. The evacuees were allowed to take only the clothes they wore and a toothbrush.

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The operator-evacuees were taken to Australia, where they joined the Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne (FRUMEL) and spent the war doing SIGINT against the Japanese Navy.

Edward Otte made a career out of the Navy, then spent a few years at NSA as a mid-level analyst.

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